City – Space – Identities in the 21st Century

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1. Cities / City politics belong to the main (co-) producers of today's identities

The more cities become living-places of more and more people, the more cities are forced to develop concepts of living-together for different individuals, groups and communities. With their politics they define, design, and invent identities as well as their social roles in the urban environments.

2. Instruments of making up urban identities

Investment as well as austerity politics are the main instruments of making up urban identities.

In order to bring forward inclusion and integration cities have to invest in all the public goods that keep individuals, groups and communities together. Austerity measures and exclusion drive them apart. Investment politics and austerity measures show the hierarchies of appreciation in a society of recognition: What does the city invest in? And what doesn't the city invest in? Which city dwellers and communities are going to be disadvantaged through austerity politics and which not?

Investment and austerity politics produces social splitting as well as social cohesion, citizens with / without access to public institutions, non-citizens with / without rights for access to public institutions. The impact of the ongoing politics of social splitting on cities appears as segregation of urban spaces up to the point of formal and informal urban districts.

3. Challenges that today's cities are facing

To characterise the conflict between "vital processes" and "freezing forms" Georg Simmel, once a well-known German sociologist, has found the expression "dialectics without reconciliation".

The "vital processes" of life are creating their specific world of forms – like tailor-made dresses. But they begin to freeze. And inasmuch "freezing" forms are generally being preserved beyond their time they begin to conflict with changing "vital processes". Changes are being constrained, life is being violated.

One cannot ignore that Simmel's "dialectics without reconciliation" is again at work in today's cities. Three fields of evidence:

Freezing forms on a social urban level

Example 1:

Related to the hundred of thousands of "sans-papiers" in today's cities, freezing forms appear as ignorance regarding social facts and the lack of rights. People without rights respectively strongly limited rights are fighting for jobs, for access to schools and medical treatment. Without the help of sympathizers, without the willingness of doctors to provide (free) treatment, without the courage to transgress the borders of legality such „underground existences" are unthinkable.

Freezing forms in urbanism and urban equipment

Example 2:

Today's cities are threatened through the impacts of globalisation and the worldwide financial crisis: closed public facilities as libraries, theatres, schools, kindergardens, swimming pools. The question is, who is threatened by this austerity politics? Who is threatened by all these neglected, reduced or simply abandoned urban infrastructures? The answer is quite clear: It's the cities themselves that are threatened and the quality of life of all those who depend on public infrastructures.

Freezing forms in economic aspects

Example 3:

The most striking freezing forms in the economic field today have become evident with the current socialisation of expenses and the privatisation of profits. Who is saved in the current financial crisis? The banking institutions – not the public infrastructure. The German municipalities' total deficit in 2010 amounts to 15 billions Euro – this is nothing compared to the billions the state paid for the bailout of banks.

So it's hardly surprising that a study of the German Institute of Economical Research (DIW) speaks about „the recent years' false politics" (quoting Berthold Huber, president of the trade union IG Metall) that has „unbalanced the social balance in Germany (of course in other European States too). The bill of the unsocial austerity politics is going to be presented to the people whereas its originators earn billions [...] and continue speculation. A change of fiscal politics", says Huber, „is urgent."

With these social, urbanistic and economical freezing forms of politics, today's cities are obstructing the "vital processes" anew. And if Simmel is right there is a hope: In the conflict between frozen forms and vital processes the latter always break up sclerotic forms ...

4. What role does the identification or non-identification of citizens with their city play in urban development?

The answer is a real important one. The basis of their role is whether or not citizens gain or don't gain recognition, says Wilhelm Heitmeyer, a sociologist of Bielefeld University, in his *Die Krise der Städte.* Non-recognition is one of the strongest forms of desintegration and thus one of the main sources of (urban) violence.

What does this mean in respect to the city? Recognition respectively non-recognition depends on who has the right of being represented in the city, in its public institutions, public spaces et cetera – and who has not? If we do not want to have people fighting in the streets for their rights as citizens the most prominent and urgent question is: How are the existing urban structures to complete in order to enable any repressed group to be represented in the urban space and its facilities and living forms?

First of all identification is having rights. The right of access to education, learning, culture, medicine, public infrastructure, to affordable living space etc. The most important question is whether the city is interested in citizens included in its spaces, its opportunities, its infrastructure – or whether the city fosters individual, social und spatial exclusion.

5. Consequences or chances for integration and social cohesion

Do cities want to go on with their current production of identities based on inclusion or exclusion of their inhabitants? Do they want to go on with the current politics of investment respectively austerity?

Can they any longer afford a profound splitting of the urban society hazarding the consequences of
(1) disempowerment of the cities and their inhabitants,
(2) the segregation of their social strata,
(3) the visible consequences in the urban space (gated communities, electronic walls and fences, video-surveillance and so on, formal / informal parts of the cities)?

How can cities survive as liveable places for everyone? A question that is directly connected to the question how cities can be able to close their gaping financial holes and where the money comes from for the maintenance and the modernisation of their public institutions and infrastructures?

If the city is going to privilege integration and social cohesion it needs more than innovative projects. The city needs innovation and just politics.

If it comes to changing cultural images on the economic side of urban societies the term "bonus" – still highly prominent in financial debates – has to be reshaped to its original meaning: A bonus is a gratification for good performances...

Cities produce a huge bunch of locational advantages. Locational advantages are – as Saskia Sassen argues – crucial for international corporations. But what about the respective bonuses for the cities? What about the corporations' contributions to urban societies? Where are the equivalents from the side of the international corporations and banking institutes? We hear only about their claim for low taxes. The time is ripe for just tax-politics: city politics should postulate "bonuses" for good urban locations. Bonuses to be paid to the cities for locational advantages – not longer for private pouches.

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